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THIS SHORT FEATURE HIGHLIGHTS A COMMON WELFARE PROBLEM SEEN IN PACK ANIMALS WORKING WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL MOUNTAIN TOURISM INDUSTRY. AFTER OUTLINING THE NATURE AND IMPORT OF THE PROBLEM, IT PROVIDES SOME USEFUL ADVICE ON WHAT IMLS AND OTHER MOUNTAIN PROFESSIONALS CAN DO TO HELP ADDRESS THE PROBLEM.



ROPE BURNS and pack animals



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FIGURE 3: THE MULE PICTURED ABOVE, ON THE LEFT, HAS SCARRING OVER BOTH PASTERNS (THE AREA IMMEDIATELY ABOVE THE HOOF) FOLLOWING YEARS OF REPEATED TRAUMA. IMAGES © GLEN COUSQUER.

ROPE BURNS

The readership will be familiar with rope burns and the pain these injuries give rise to. A rope, drawn speedily across the palm, can cut through a glove and bite deep into the tissues of the palm. The friction exerted over a small surface area and the resulting heat produces a heat burn that destroys the epidermal skin and can extend deep into the dermis below. Without the protection offered by a decent pair of gloves, these injuries can be particularly unpleasant. Gloves are therefore de rigueur for many mountain professionals and mountaineers when handling ropes.

Our familiarity with this problem, and the painful nature of the associated injuries, should make us all the more sympathetic towards those pack animals who spend their lives tethered and repeatedly subjected to rope burns.

ANIMAL NEEDS VERSUS HUMAN NEEDS

Owners of pack animals like to secure their animals in such a way that they can be sure to find them exactly where they left them. On expedition this is typically done by means of a tether or a hobble.

Animals, by contrast, have very different

needs and priorities. When not working, they essentially need to feed and water themselves for they have to recover from their considerable exertions. They further need to be able to undertake a wide range of natural behaviours — socialising, exploring, playing and having fun. They also need to be able to evade

KEY FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ROPE BURNS

- Use of narrow ropes that exert considerable pressure (often resulting in burns) over a small surface area.
- Lack of alternative systems (pens, fields, electric fencing).
- Widespread reliance on cheap nylon ropes for tethering.
- Disappearance of traditional woollen ropes.
- Use of other inappropriate materials such as string or chains.
- No use of head collars as a point of attachment.
- Lack of knowledge about equine behaviour.
- Antiquated training practices and techniques that rely on fear and subjugation.



flies and seek out a comfortable environment (whether this be in terms of shade or shelter, or some other criteria).

In countries such as Morocco, where pack animals such as mules are widely used within the mountain tourism industry, owners often have a limited understanding of the complex range of needs their animals are subject to. The owner's own priority is simply to secure their mule. This then makes it difficult, sometimes impossible, for the mule's priorities to be met.

TETHERING

Owners tether their animals by means of a short length of plastic (or nylon) rope and a heavy metal peg that they bang into the ground (Figure 1). The rope is tied around the mule's pastern in such a way it cannot slip over the hoof.

In many cases, this rope is thin, filthy and knotted tightly in place. The mule will then spend the time they are tethered straining against this tether in order to reach areas of grazing that are tantalisingly out of reach.

The regular, repeated trauma to the lower limbs of these animals results in chronic injuries. These burns are typically seen as white scarring over the lower limbs (Figure 2). The melanin-producing cells within the hair follicle are destroyed, leading to the production of white hairs (Figure 3). If the burn extends deep into the dermis, that is to say right down to the hair bulb, the follicle will be destroyed and no further hair growth will be possible (Figure 4).

In some cases, these deep burns can become infected and may even leave the mule vulnerable to tetanus. Both man and horse are vulnerable to this killer disease, which is caused by the toxin of a clostridial bacterium, whose spores are found ubiquitously, in soil, across the world. In the UK and other developed countries, horses are vaccinated against this disease. This is not the case in

developing world countries where equines are entirely reliant on their own natural immunity.

SOLUTIONS

Visiting IMLs and trek leaders may feel they have little influence over the condition of the mules provided by their in-country representative. This needs to change. Pressure needs to be exerted on in-country agents to ensure welfare standards are enforced!

I have been working in Morocco with the Donkey Sanctuary and SPANA Maroc to improve the welfare of pack mules working in the High Atlas. Full details on this work are available directly from me, as well as via the Donkey Sanctuary blog at <http://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/blogs/glen-cousquer>.

A welfare code is being prepared and all leaders and trek agencies are called upon to support this code.

Work has been undertaken to develop

an alternative to the nylon rope tether. A short length of rope (50cm) can be doubled up to double the contact surface area. This can then be further protected by a leather sheath sown over the rope (Figures 5 and 6). The leather must be oiled or treated with a leather conditioner to keep it supple. It is suggested that groups undertaking mule-supported treks provide these tethers themselves. With this in mind, they are being produced by the local women's cooperative in Imlil and further work is ongoing to improve the quality of the end product.

MONEY FOR OLD ROPE!

Well not quite! But visiting Leaders and Guides can bring out and donate their old climbing ropes. These will be easier to maintain than the local nylon ropes, providing they are cut and sealed to ensure the ends do not fray. Such donations can be made directly to the women's cooperative or passed on through me.



ABOVE LEFT: FIGURE 5: ROPE TETHERS AND LEATHER SHEATHS, AS PICTURED ARE PREPARED BY STUDENTS AT THE MOROCCAN NATIONAL GUIDE SCHOOL FOR USE ON THEIR TRAINING EXPEDITIONS. **ABOVE RIGHT: FIGURE 6:** THE LEATHER SHEATH PROVIDES PROTECTION FROM ROPE BURNS AND HAD BEEN TRIALLED SUCCESSFULLY BY MULETEERS ON EXPEDITION IN THE HIGH ATLAS.

ABOVE LEFT: FIGURE 1: ON TREKS, PACK MULES ARE TYPICALLY TETHERED TO A METAL PEG. HERE, THE MULE'S RANGE OF MOVEMENT HAS BEEN FURTHER LIMITED BECAUSE THE SHORT LENGTH OF ROPE HAS WOUND ITSELF ROUND THE PEG. THIS MEANS THE MULE WILL STRUGGLE TO REACH MUCH OF THE STRAW THAT HAS BEEN SCATTERED ON THE GROUND.

CENTRE: FIGURE 2: REPEATED TRAUMA FROM A THIN NARROW NYLON ROPE RESULTS IN HAIR LOSS, BURNS, SCARRING AND DEPIGMENTATION.

RIGHT: FIGURE 4: THESE ARE THE TYPICAL TETHERING INJURIES SEEN IN THE MULES WORKING IN THE TOUBKAL NATIONAL PARK. THE HAIR FOLLICLES HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY DESTROYED ON THE MULE'S LEFT PASTERNS AND THERE ARE STILL SCABS WHERE RECENT BURNS HAVE CAUSED FURTHER TRAUMA.